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PROGRAM Face the Nation STATION WDVM TV
CBS Network

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SUBJECT Interview with Prime Minister Begin

DIANE SAWYER: Prime Minister Begin, if Israel can have an atom bomb, why can't Iraq?

PRIME MINISTER MENACHEM BEGIN: You ask me about an Israeli atom bomb? Israel will never be the first to introduce atomic weapons into the Middle East. We are prepared to sign the NPT if our neighbors sign a peace treaty with us. But as long as there is no peace treaty, there is no point in a non-proliferation treaty.

ANNOUNCER: From CBS News Tel Aviv, a spontaneous and unrehearsed news interview on Face the Nation with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Prime Minister Begin will be questioned by CBS News correspondent Bob Simon; by David Shipler, Israel bureau chief of the New York Times; and by CBS News State Department correspondent Diane Sawyer, who is substituting for the moderator, George Herman.

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SAWYER: Mr. Prime Minister, I want to follow up a bit on some of the considerations that went into your decision to make this strike against Iraq. It has been called the first major military attack on a nuclear site. Are you at all concerned that in any way you have opened a precedent for other nations to make similar attacks?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: No, not at all. But first of all, we had to think about the security of our people. And may I put it very simply? The security of our children.

We had all the available information, absolutely sure

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that Saddam Hussein, the tyrant of Iraq, has an ambition to develop an atomic bomb. And in that reactor, Osirak, near Baghdad, an atomic bomb is being developed. That was our absolutely sure information from the best and most reliable sources possible.

Lately, we got the following additional information. That reactor will be operational say, or, as the experts call it, hot, either at the end -- at the beginning of July or at the beginning of September.

So we didn't have much time. We didn't have any time whatsoever to lose. Because let us assume at the beginning of September. How could we have known that it won't be in July? We are not there every day. We have our sources of information, in fact. But we cannot say.

That would have been a horrible risk. Why? Because if the reactor becomes operational -- in other words, hot -- then it's bombing or its opening would be at the greatest risk to the population of Baghdad. Because if the hot reactor is bombed and becomes open, then a wave of radioactive poison goes out and covers the sky over Baghdad and may kill or inflict horrible wounds on hundreds of thousands of people, men, women and children.

Under such circumstances, I, for one, would have never suggested to bomb that reactor. And I am sure none of my colleagues would have ever accepted or supported such a proposal. Then we are lost, because then we would have been passive, we could do anything. And in two or three, at the most four years, Mr. Saddam Hussein would have his three or four Hiroshima-type bombs.

As you know, at Hiroshima there were 200,000 casualties in killed and in wounded. Their wounds [technical difficulties]. And they are being inherited by the future generations.

SAWYER: So you're not...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: In other words, with three bombs -- I beg your pardon.

SAWYER: If I may just say this. So you're not at all concerned about it.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: In three bombs, he would have inflicted upon us 600,000 casualties, a fifth of our people. In American terms, proportionately, it would have meant 44 million people. Would the United States have stood for that?

What was your question? I couldn't hear you?

SAWYER: My question was, are you saying, then, that you're not at all concerned that this has far-reaching implications in terms of the actions of other countries, if Israel goes without being punished at all?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: What implications? Tell me, my friend, should we have waited because of that consideration you put now to me until the reactor is hot, we cannot do anything, and the bombs fall on our heads?

Every country will decide for itself. And there are the great powers.

So now, I feel a free man, you know. I feel like a man who left prison. I go out. I see our children. They will live. For two years I lived with this horrible thought that maybe, if we are too late with that operation, the children -- now they are five, six year old. When they will be 10, the radioactivity will come over their head -- little heads. It was the most horrible period in my life, I must tell you with complete -- in complete candor.

DAVID SHIPLER: Mr. Prime Minister, where do you go now? You've knocked out one reactor in the Iraq? Other countries in the region may develop nuclear power, nuclear weapons. Is there any end to this, as you see it? I mean what is the end?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: What countries? Iraq cannot rebuild its reactor soon. It will take at least three, perhaps five years. I hope that Monsieur Francois Mitterand, in contradiction to Monsieur Giscard d'Estaing, will not provide Iraq with his scientists and with enriched uranium, so that source of help for Iraq will disappear. I hope Italy will learn its lesson and will also stop sending scientists and providing them with the materials to build the centrifugal, which it's called, to create plutonium out of enriched uranium.

The difference is that for a Hiroshima-type bomb, you need 20 kilograms of enriched uranium. But you need only seven kilograms of plutonium to build a 20, up to 30-kiloton atomic bomb. That's even larger than the Hiroshima type.

Now, if the Iraqis should rebuild, let me say in five years, their reactor and try to produce atomic bombs, I will not be then Prime Minister. I don't know whether I will live. But I am absolutely sure that, based on the precedent we created, any Prime Minister and any government of Israel will destroy that reactor before it is operational.

BOB SIMON: Mr. Prime Minister...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Not exactly by planes. There

are many routes and many ways to do so.

BOB SIMON: Speaking of these many routes and many ways, Mr. Prime Minister, in referring to the two years of agony that you've spent that you've just referred to...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Two.

SIMON: Two years of agony.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: It's enough.

SIMON: This is not the first time that an attempt has been made to destroy the Iraqi reactor. Just a little more than two years ago, parts of the reactor were sabotaged while they were still in a warehouse in France near Toulon. It has been widely assumed that this was an Israeli operation, which sabotaged the reactor in France.

Now that the reactor has been destroyed, now that it is a hole in the ground near Baghdad, can you tell us, Mr. Prime Minister, whether or not the operation in Toulon two years ago was an Israeli operation?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: This is your assumption. I can not say anything about it. If you have so good connections with the Mosad, ask them.

SAWYER: Mr. Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Yes, my friend.

SAWYER: Even those who accept your reasoning on the raid wonder why it was done at a time when it would embarrass so directly Mr. Sadat, particularly since Mr. Sadat has gone out on a limb for peace in the Middle East, at a time when he seemed to be repairing somewhat his own relationships with the other Arab countries.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: What embarrassment? I sent my friend General Sharon to see Sadat. He went there before because of our cooperation in agriculture. And before he went there, I asked him and told him, "Ari (?), you talk to President Sadat. There are many problems now to deal with. First of all, Lebanon, the Syrian crisis. There are also bilateral problems, the multinational force, the negotiations in Jerusalem, etcetera. And tell him that I would like to see him, just to talk about these problems."

He did, and reported to me that Sadat agreed immediately. And then I phoned him. It was a Thursday. And as we call each other by our private names, I asked him, "Anwar, can

you see me between the 1st and the 10th of June?" And I made a concrete suggestion, Thursday, 10 o'clock at Ophira (?). And he immediately agreed.

Then, as it was an international talk, as usually, it was cut off. And then President Sadat got in touch with me again. He wanted to be sure, and asked me, "Menachem, did we speak about Thursday, 10 o'clock in Sharm el Sheikh?" as he calls the place. I said, "Yes. Exactly." Then we talked.

Did you expect me to tell him that military absolute secret on which the lives of our pilots depended? Did anybody hear from me about it, my wife, my son, anybody in the world, except and behind those who had to know? Doesn't President Sadat have his strategic secrets? Does he tell me them? Do I demand of him to tell me them?

SAWYER: Have he has said anything, Mr. Prime Minister...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Just a moment.

And we finished our talks in a most friendly atmosphere. I knew that on Sunday there is going to be that operation. I couldn't tell him anything. But what does it have in common, at all?

SAWYER: Has he said anything...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Then I set free President Sadat of any responsibility when I said, "I didn't tell him even one word about it."

SAWYER: Has he said anything to you since? And are you still invited to Alexandria next month?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: He invited me to Alexandria, yes, to come between the 1st and the 15th of July, after the elections.

SAWYER: Do you know that's still on?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: I beg your pardon?

SAWYER: Do you know that's still on? Since the strike, has that been reconfirmed?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: After the elections. First of all, let us have the elections on the 30th of June. We shall see then who is going to form a new government. If I will form a new government, I will gladly go to Alexandria and have another talk with him.

SHIPLER: Mr. Prime Minister, could...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: If Peres is elected, Mr. Peres will go. In a democracy, everybody believes in his victory. But victory is in that poll, not in an opinion poll, but in the real poll.

SHIPLER: Could we turn to Israeli-American relations for a moment and ask you about the criticisms you made of Secretary of Defense Weinberger for allegedly recommending a cutoff of aid to Israel? There's been some criticism back at you from Washington, apparently, or some unhappiness that you have interjected yourself into what apparently was an internal disagreement within the American Cabinet.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: No, I did not. But I will tell you something. I don't retract even one word I said at [unintelligible] in the face, in the presence of 20,000 people. But I don't want to go into that polemics anymore. It's enough what I said. And everything I said was true. Now that's enough and we deal with the actual problems.

I never intended to attack Mr. Weinberger personally. It was a political issue. And I don't want to repeat a statement I made. I don't want to add to it. I don't intend to detract from it.

SHIPLER: Do you have any broader views on American-Israeli relations now?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Of course. I have very broad views, as broad as America is between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

SHIPLER: But specifically...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: We are friends and allies. I will always quote that expression by the Secretary of State. We are in a permanent alliance. President Reagan is one of the most friendly Presidents in the United States ever, except the day when President Truman recognized the State of Israel and President Nixon decided about the airlift. We have never had a more friendly President in the White House, except for those two days, not for all the days. I know it very well. And the Administration, in general, is very friendly towards Israel.

But now the relations are not as they used to be -- namely, Israel is not on the receiving line. Israel is an ally, a strong ally, a faithful ally of the United States of America, of the Free World. And so the Secretary of State says and so the President says time and again. This is exactly what the foundations of the relations between the two countries should be. This is my outlook.

SIMON: Mr. Prime Minister, one question which is being asked in the United States and in Israel is not so much why did Israel destroy the Iraqi reactor, but why did you announce it? American officials have said, "Why didn't they just do it, and we could have applauded quietly on the sidelines? But by announcing it, by boasting it, it put us in a terribly difficult position." Without the announcement, there would have been no strain in relations, there would have been no postponement of arms delivery.

Did you consider this, sir?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: How clever. How clever that idea is. I don't know who are the officials you talked to.

Now, listen. It was on the eve of Shavot (?), Pentecost, when my friends -- in other words, it was Sunday, the eve of our holiday, when I asked my friends to come to my home, to my residence, the official residence. My home is in Tel Aviv, the official residence. It was just one hour for the holiday to come in and the religious ministers who were present. I came out from my library and said, "My friends, at this very moment our planes are flying towards Baghdad in order to attack and destroy the atomic bomb-producing reactor near Baghdad, Osirak."

Then, after an hour and 25 minutes, thank God for that moment, I could have come out after my talk with the Chief of Staff and informed my friends, "The target is destroyed and all the boys are coming safely back home." That was the great moment in our lives.

And then we started to think what to say to the world. So we dealt with this problem. We decided that we shall not be the first to announce it. Later we learned that on the way, the Jordanians recognized us, the Saudis recognized us, the Iraqis recognized us. Our planes -- our planes and with Israeli signs, no camouflage whatsoever. Then...

SAWYER: Mr. Prime Minister...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Excuse me, my friend. I have to finish my story first.

Then, the following day, we were still silent, until I got a phone call from my military secretary, who told me, just like this, that at two o'clock in the afternoon the broadcasting corporation of Jordan announced that Israeli planes attacked vital objectives in Iraq. So every child could have understood what that communique meant.

Oh then -- only then I said, "At three o'clock, publish it on our radio." We didn't publish it first.

If we hadn't published it, it would have come out like this: The Iraqis intended to publish it two hours later. Then we wouldn't have any option whatsoever. And then what would they have said? "Yes, they destroyed the reactor. But they don't have simple courage even to say so to the world. They try to hide it."

What kinds of action -- what are we, thieves in the night? We went out to destroy that reactor because it was a mortal danger to our people and to our children. There wasn't to be ashamed of, nothing to apologize for. We had to declare it. But especially after it was already published on the Jordanian radio. And therefore it came out, but not at three o'clock. Because there was some misunderstanding with the voice of the announcer, it came out at four o'clock. And since then, we announced it hour after hour. And the Iraqis announced it two hours later. And they apologized.

We didn't have to play around with it.

SAWYER: Mr. Prime Minister...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: And as far as applauding it quietly, I never heard about a quiet applause. When you applaud, everybody hears it.

SAWYER: Our time is getting very short.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: I beg your pardon?

SAWYER: Our time is getting very short. If we could move on to Mr. Habib's mission and Israel's intentions now about the Syrian missiles.

Do you plan to take them out? How long to you plan to give Mr. Habib?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: You should ask Mr. Habib how long he's going around shuttling here. He is now in Riyadh. And I learned from the American ambassador that he pondered whether from Riyadh to go to Jerusalem or to Damascus. So I suggested to my friend Sam Lewis that Mr. Habib goes to Damascus first, and then comes to us. Because I want to know what is the result of his shuttle [unintelligible]. So probably he will be here on Wednesday. In the meantime, between Sunday and Wednesday, he will visit Damascus. And then I will hear from him.

I told him time and again it cannot go on for an indefinite period. And then I hope I will hear. We gave him all the time. Then President Sadat asked me, also, to prolong his time. We did. We don't want war with Syria. Syria is afraid to make war against us.

SAWYER: Does he have at least through the election?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Therefore there won't be any war. And he should try to remove the missiles.

SAWYER: Does he have at least through the election?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: I beg your pardon? What election?

SAWYER: Does he have at least through the election before you would act?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: This problem doesn't have anything with elections to do whatsoever. Why elections, my friend? What are missiles, what are atomic bombs have anything in common with elections? Where from comes this curious idea?

Does a people have to defend itself or does it not? Should it defend itself? What does it have in common with a certain date, 30th of June, in which the people goes to the polls and elects its prime minister, its government? It doesn't have anything in common.

But we gave him ample time. We didn't put a deadline. On Wednesday I hope to hear from him. Then we shall know.

SIMON: Sir, your own chief of staff suggested that the operation against the Iraqi reactor might not have been possible had the American AWACS planes already been delivered to Saudi Arabia. Do you believe, sir, that now, in the wake of the strike and with the current tension between Jerusalem and Washington, that it is more likely that the AWACS sale will be passed by the American Congress?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: First of all, I would like to tell you that our chief of staff knows exactly what he is saying. If he said so, sir, it is so. And why should it now be really put into realization to make our position harsher, more dangerous, that the Saudis could have attacked our planes? It's a curious logic.

To the contrary. Not it was proved that the AWACS are very dangerous to Israel's security. And we should continue to oppose that deal. No doubt whatsoever. Even with greater vigor. Because, as the chief of staff told you, with the AWACS in the hands of the Saudis, not the Americans, our pilots would have been attacked at the beginning, and perhaps some SA missiles would have been put on the route and somebody would have shot down our pilots with the planes.

What do you think? Would it have been an advisable development, a good development as far as Israel is concerned,

or it would have been a tragedy?

SHIPLER: Mr. Prime Minister, can I return to the attack on the reactor for a moment and ask you for some details on the secret installation that you said -- at first you said was 40 meters underground, and then corrected that to four meters underground?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: Yes. Yes, I made a mistake and I admitted it without any hesitation whatsoever.

SHIPLER: Could you tell us a little more about that installation, in the light of the fact that I understand General Evrie (?), the Commander of the Air Force, indicated in a radio interview that he did not know about this or was not aware...

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: He didn't say he didn't know. He said he doesn't want to talk about it.

What I want to assure you is there was an underground installation. That's all I can say. I cannot give you more details.

But because of a certain mistake, through reading, I had to correct it later. The copula, the crown was 10 meters high. And the underground was four meters deep. And therefore that zero wandered, when I read it, from the first to the second, and I made that mistake, a very decent mistake. And when I learned about it, I immediately phoned the Reuters correspondent personally and told him I apologize for it.

SIMON: One last question, Mr. Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: I think it's fair enough.

SIMON: Excuse me. It has just been reported on Israel radio that the United States knew about Iraq's intention to build a bomb, and communicated this knowledge to you. Can you comment on that, sir?

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: No, I cannot accept such a statement. But we had all the information months ago, from the most reliable sources. What I can promise you, that if we meet in the United States in my room...

SAWYER: I'm sorry, Mr. Prime Minister. Our time is up.

PRIME MINISTER BEGIN: ...I will show you that information.

SAWYER: I'm sorry, but our time is up. Thank you very much for being here.